DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 871 CS 212 641

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TITLE Writing across the Entire Curriculum: A Status Report on Faculty Attitudes.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Educational Research Association (Ellenville, NY, October 31-November 2, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Faculty; Educational Research; Higher Education; School Surveys; *Teacher Attitudes; *Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Elizabethtown College PA; State University of New York Coll at Fredonia; Teacher Surveys

ABSTRACT

A study examined faculty attitudes toward writing across the curriculum. In a pilot study, 80 full-time faculty at Elizabethtown College responded to the 35-question survey (for a response rate of 67%). Although Elizabethtown College had recently approved a new core curriculum that called for more writing across the curriculum, the administration and faculty alike were bewildered about implementing such a change. Results indicated that the faculty had a poor perception of student writing, felt a lack of preparation as writing evaluators, but expressed a strong interest in improving their abilities as writing evaluators. The survey was refined and administered to the 230 full-time faculty at State University of New York College at Fredonia, which had a well established writing across the curriculum program. Of the 120 respondents to the survey (representing a response rate of 52%), two-thirds had participated in training workshops conducted by an English department faculty member and had received monetary compensation from the college's administration for their work. Results also indicated that the faculty had an improved perception of the quality of student writing, that they perceived writing across the curriculum as important for all departments, and that most faculty considered the quality of student writing to have improved since the implementation of a writing across the curriculum program. Findings suggest that writing across the curriculum does improve faculty perceptions of student writing. Such improvement, however, takes time to develop, must involve a committed faculty and administration, and must provide follow-up and reinforcement throughout the campus. (RS)

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Writing Across the Entire Curriculum: A Status Report on Faculty Attitudes

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One of the important developments from the process writing movement of the 1970's has been the increasing concern for schools to expand their expectations for student writing beyond the English classroom. Composition scholars such as James Britton, Janet Emig, and James Moffett have all recommended that writing should take place across all disciplines during a student's education. In 1989, the Carnegie Foundation Report on Higher Education also advised colleges and universities to develop writing across the curriculum programs to help improve their students' writing facilities. The Carnegie Report was based on a nationwide survey of 5,000 professors; 75% described college students as being "seriously underprepared" in their writing skills. In his comments to the Carnegie Report, Ernest Boyer remarked that "...if, after 16 years of formal education, undergraduates, regardless of their institution, cannot write with clarity...then we should close the college doors and start again."[1]

Boyer's drastic suggestion is obviously not feasible for those of us actively involved in teaching college undergraduates. Although prestigious scholars and institutions encourage writing across disciplines, we know that few colleges and universities have successfully generated such programs--yet their doors remain open. Most of us in higher education seem to agree that writing across the curriculum is a good idea, even as we are reluctant to practice it. So what's the catch? Why are we lacking such programs? What should colleges do to address the issue?

In an attempt to answer these questions, we designed a study to discover faculty attitudes toward writing across the curriculum. We began developing our methodology in 1989, designing a survey instrument with faculty advisement, then distributing the survey for anonymous faculty responses. Our survey, consisting of 35 questions, included topics concerning the professional background of the respondents and their assessment of student writing as well as what they consider important when evaluating student writing and their sense of competency as writing evaluators. We invited two colleges to participate in the study--one with no instituted writing across the curriculum program and one with an established program.

We conducted the pilot study in April, 1989, at Elizabethtown College, a private liberal arts college of 1,200 students in southcentral Pennsylvania. Although Elizabethtown had recently approved a new core curriculum that called for more writing across disciplines, the administration and faculty were alike bewildered about how to go about implementing such a change; therefore the

college was eager to participate in a study which could help them clarify its approach to the issue. We distributed the survey to all of the 120 full-time academic faculty. The response rate of 67% (80 total respondents) suggested a great deal of interest in the topic among the faculty.

Although we suspected that the small student population and the liberal arts orientation of the college might create a more tolerant attitude toward student writing, the responses of the Elizabethtown faculty closely resembled the findings of the Carnegie Report. Generally, the faculty had a poor perception of student writing; 56% rated it as either "fair" or "poor." Although the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their students' writing competency, they also indicated a lack of preparation as writing evaluators. Over 50% of the respondents had received no training in assessing student writing (in fact, 12% who indicated they had received no training also did not feel the need for any special assistance to improve their skills). However, over half expressed strong interest in improving their abilities as writing evaluators if the college provided training opportunities.

As Fulwiler, Gorman, and Gorman suggest in their study of WAC training programs, faculty attitude is a key to their success.[2] To compare the attitudes of the respondents in the pilot study, we refined the survey and repeated the study at SUNY-Fredonia in October, 1989. Fredonia is a public, comprehensive college of 5,000 students, located in Western New York, and possesses a well-established WAC program. After adapting the instrument to fit the different institution, we distributed the questionnaire to the 230 full-time academic faculty, this time receiving a 52% response rate (120 total respondents). Would perceptions of student writing differ if the faculty had received training in the principles and practice of writing across the curriculum?

Of the respondents to the Fredonia survey, 2/3 had participated in training workshops conducted by an English department faculty member and had received monetary compensation by the college's administration for their work. As a result, the respondents generally felt competent to evaluate student writing. Most significantly, the faculty had an improved perception of student writing. For students at the freshman-sophomore level, over half the respondents rated the quality of student writing as either "satisfactory" or "good." Even more important, 66% rated the quality of writing for students at the junior-senior level in one of these two categories, suggesting that faculty see an improvement in students' writing abilities as they progress through their college educations. Most significantly, 83% of the respondents who had been at Fredonia for five years or more considered the overall quality of student writing to have improved when compared to five years ago--that is, since the inception of the writing across the curriculum program.

Extrapolating from the responses of the Fredonia faculty, WAC apparently makes a difference in faculty perceptions of student writing ability. Perhaps simply reading more student writing during the course of students' college careers gives faculty

greater familiarity with issues of student writing and helps them appreciate improvement when it occurs.

Many composition specialists feel that, even without overt instruction, writing improves simply by allowing students many opportunities to write and by providing them with a variety of writing experiences.[3] The results of our survey indicate that, although the Fredonia faculty perceive themselves as participating fully in writing across the curriculum, they may not actually be assigning regular and varied writing to their students. In fact, the amount of writing actually produced by students may still be relatively minimal. 62% of the Fredonia respondents indicated they require 4 or fewer assignment over the course of a semester; 22% require 5 to 7 assignments; only 16% assign writing 8 or more times a semester. When asked to estimate the typical length of these assignments, 40% responded that the typical assignment constituted 2 or fewer pages (42% required assignments of 3 to 5 pages; 18% required 6 or more pages per assignment).

When asked to estimate the total pages of text they expect from students each semester, roughly half (49%) indicated they require fewer than ten pages of writing from each student. When coupled with the findings for number of assignments and assignment length, we can project that some students might conceivably produce only four or five pages of text in a given class over a semester. These totals clearly fall below the 15 page requirement of all SUNY writing intensive courses. Of course, if students were required to complete even five pages of writing from each course each semester, their writing opportunities would significantly increase. Still, students may not receive more than a minimal amount of opportunities to write during their college careers--even with a faculty supportive of writing across the curriculum.

One of the most important conceptual elements of a WAC program is the recognition by faculty that it involves all departments and disciplines, that WAC does indeed mean writing across the <u>entire</u> curriculum, not just select parts. As Richard Hendrix points out in "The Status and Politics of Writing Instruction," composition is still considered the primary province and responsibility of English departments, even though many English faculty themselves often see composition instruction as proper work only for adjuncts and unemployed humanists.[4] The 2/3 involvement in writing across the curriculum training of the Fredonia faculty, coupled with their overall positive perception of student writing, suggests that spreading the mission to improve student writing skills across disciplines is indeed a key to such success.

At Fredonia, the faculty generally seem convinced that writing should occur across disciplines; 70% of our respondents believed that WAC is important for <u>all</u> departments. Only 1% felt WAC was not important at all. Even so, a quarter (29%) responded that WAC is important for some departments, not all. Clearly, the need still exists for further clarification of the principal foundations for writing across the curriculum--that is, that it occurs throughout college courses and programs.

By examining faculty attitudes toward WAC, this study suggests

several ways to achieve a successful writing across the curriculum program. Four key considerations are 1) implementing initial faculty training, 2) providing follow-up training, 3) instilling a campus-wide sense of mission, and 4) achieving demonstrable administrative support.

The success of the Fredonia program rests on the initial faculty training. These sessions stress the importance of WAC, emphasizing its importance and the need for faculty involvement across disciplines. The initial training also provides small-group work for individual disciplines to show how each might incorporate writing into its courses. The workshops additionally provide suggestions for assessing and commenting on student writing.

However, one-shot training is not enough. Colleges and universities that begin WAC programs must continue their efforts with regular follow-up sessions to reinforce the purpose of writing across the curriculum and provide further support for faculty involvement. Follow-up training sessions should allow participants to act as peer supporters and coaches and should use "customized" sessions for disciplines as well as grouping of faculty by special concerns (such as evaluation techniques, ideas for writing assignments, etc.).

This kind of follow-up training can help instill the necessary campus-wide sense of mission. By suggesting to faculty that writing is important to their students' success in other courses as well as in their future professions, we can reinforce that writing is an important life skill--even if some faculty do not consider it a primary skill in their discipline.[5] By involving faculty in continued training, colleges can create a means to stress the relevance and importance of WAC to all departments.

Perhaps most important to the success of any writing across the curriculum program is the amount of demonstrable support it receives by college administrations. Administrators also must emphasize WAC throughout the campus to help convince faculty that writing is the responsibility of the entire academic community. As Selfe, Gorman, and Gorman discovered in their examination of one writing across the curriculum program, faculty will not continue their efforts to provide writing experiences for their students if they do not perceive some tangible rewards as a result. In the words of one of their respondents:

> "I have been, as you know, an enthusiastic supporter of student writing assignments, but to be honest, I'm souring. It's taken a lot of time and I feel it's not rewarded. Hence I have decided that next year I won't spend so much time `teaching'; I am going to spend those 30 hours of student conference time doing my own writing. I agree it was valuable for them...it's just not so for me."[6]

This dissatisfaction with the "rewards" of writing across the curriculum was echoed by our respondents at both Elizabethtown and Fredonia. Although the Fredonia faculty generally felt its administration supported its efforts (as evidenced by the monetary compensation to attend workshop training sessions), 64%--not

surprisingly--identified class size and work load as a major concern. Despite perennial budget crises and competition for resource allocation, college administrations must provide visible and real support to achieve successful writing across the curriculum programs at their institutions. Reducing class sizes or course loads for faculty who actively demonstrate a writing focus in their courses is one possible measure. Similarly, rewarding those departments that demonstrate commitment to WAC is another.

Our study suggests that writing across the curriculum does improve faculty perceptions of student writing. However, the results indicate that such improvement takes time to develop, it must involve a committed faculty and administration, and it must go beyond initial efforts to provide follow-up and reinforcement throughout the campus. Most important, writing across the curriculum can best succeed only with the involvement and support of the entire institution. Perhaps if we achieved such commitment from faculty across each college and university campus nationwide, we could improve the findings of the next Carnegie Report on higher education. Instead of closing our college doors, we could give our students positive endorsement for having the key to open any and all doors in their educational and professional futures.

NOTES

1 Huntley Collins, "75% of professors rate undergrads 'underprepared': Study's findings prompt call for stiff writing requirement in all college courses," The Buffalo News, Evening ed., August 8, 1989, p. 1.

2 Toby Fulwiler, Michael E. Gorman, and Margaret Gorman, "Changing Faculty Attitudes Toward Writing," in Writing Across the Disciplines, ed. Art Young and Toby Fulwiler (Montclair: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 19[illegible], p. 54.

3 See Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) and Donald Murray, A Writer Teaches Writing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

4 Richard Hendrix, "The Status and Politics of Writing Instruction," in Writing: The Nature, Development, and Teaching of Written Communication, Vol. I, ed. Marcia Farr Whiteman (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1981), p. 56.

5 As R. Baird Shuman notes, college administrations "must find ways to convey to their faculties that learning is enhanced when writing becomes an integral part of the learning process in every classroom." Shuman's article on WAC gives suggestions for providing writing

opportunities to students, such as brief written responses to course content at the beginning and end of each class session. See R. Baird Shuman, Educational Leadership, vol. 47 (8), May, 1990, p. 90.

6 Cynthia L. Selfe, Michael E. Gorman, and Margaret Gorman, "Watching Our Garden Grow: Longitudinal Changes in Student Writing Apprehension," in Writing Across the Disciplines, ed. Art Young and Toby Fulwiler (Montclair: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1986), p. 242.